

By the time you start reading this you should know the basics about genre. You will be able to recognise key genres and see how they are advertised, but you may have in your mind a question about why genre actually matters – whether just being able to spot the differences between two genres tells you anything *useful* about any of them.

You may have also come up against confusion when trying to fit some recent media products into particular genres. While in the past it seems a western was a western and a quiz-show was a quiz show, in recent years media producers have been turning the tables on us. This booklet will cover many of these issues in more detail and go alongside the things you are going to do with genre in your lessons.

Why is it important?

Whenever we see a media text for the first time it is like entering a new and unfamiliar world – all the characters, locations and events are new to us. Everything about it would seem unfamiliar and therefore alarming if it weren't for the fact that we could recognise the Genre and spot the conventions – we feel at home in this strange world.

For this reason, rather than just looking at what genre conventions are *present* in a media text (the easiest way of studying genre) it is actually more interesting to think about what goes on in our heads when we encounter a genre piece: the effect these genre conventions have on us as an audience and how much we are allowed to feel comfortable and secure in the conventions of the genre. A text can use the conventions to make us feel at home, or confuse us by deviating from them.

A famous example of this messing around with genre expectations is a film called *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969). It begins, apparently, typically: the hats, the guns the horses – the *iconography* of the Western – are all present and correct. However, this sense of security and comfort soon goes: as the film opens a group of soldiers enter a village and we see some bandits aiming their guns at them. Because we are used to the genre we know what to expect – it is clear that the soldiers will turn out to be the heroes of the film and the bandits the villains. We might already be anticipating the end of the film when the bandits are finally killed in a climactic shoot out.

We'd be wrong, however. The soldiers are in fact bandits in disguise and the bandits are working for the police – our expectation of the genre has been turned on its head.

Now think about how this affects audience enjoyment of the film. As it starts, we are enjoying the way it fits our expectations of a Western, but as things become unfamiliar, we enjoy even more the unexpectedness of the genre being modified. We rely on our knowledge of genre, but equally enjoy seeing the rules broken as long as the film-maker doesn't go too far.

If you've seen *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) you can think about that in the same way. As members of the audience we feel at home because we have seen many gangster films in the past but we also enjoy the script which makes the characters talk like no gangsters we've ever heard before – the situations are stock ones for the genre, but the dialogue is from a very different kind of film.

All of this works because we have become a sophisticated audience that can cope with seeing genre conventions messed around with, or even mixed with those of another genre. This puts us ahead of the audiences past: we have seen many more films and television programmes

than anyone in the history of the media, and expect – indeed demand that – producers surprise us.

In summary, genre offers audiences a structure; however rebellious we think we are, we still like some level of organisation in the media texts that we enjoy. Genre offers us this – we feel secure in our knowledge of the workings of the genre.

In fact there are a number of ways that we can enjoy genre – as much as we like to be surprised, we also enjoy the anticipation of waiting for predictable features. You may complain, for example, that *Neighbours* is obvious, but one of the reasons that the series is so popular is that regular viewers enjoy seeing their genre expectations fulfilled. Watching shows like this may not be as passive an experience as the ‘couch potato’ newspaper stories suggest: the way that audiences wait for certain genre moments – the way they predict elements before they appear – requires thought and participation.

TASK

List below three examples of media texts you’ve seen where your expectations of the genre were subverted.

Do audiences actually create genre?

There is quite a powerful argument that audiences have a major role in the creation of genre: our bums on seats are the principal reason why any film gets made in the first place. Think about how this idea works – if a film is produced that re-invents a genre that we, the audience, had grown tired of (*Scream* for horror, or *Gladiator* for the epic), it only has a chance of re-viving the genre if we actually end up *liking* it. Similarly within an existing genre, innovations in individual films only affect the genre as a whole if they are accepted by the audience.

In fact, the audience are the force that makes a genre change – it would be much easier for film companies to keep churning out identical genre products, but we resist it and falling ticket returns force change on the studios. On the other hand, audience’s unwillingness to buy outside recognised genres could stifle creativity on the part of film-makers.

Think about how all of this has affected the recent history of the horror genre. During the seventies a number of new and original films such as *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) and in particular, *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), became

hugely popular with audiences. The film companies responded by making loads of cheap cash-in imitations of these films such as *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) and its many sequels.

As time went by, audiences gradually became bored by the unoriginality of these films and the filmmakers were forced to innovate. Initially this meant including ever increasing levels of violence, but mainstream audiences reacted with concern – their taste for the genre re-treated in the face of fears about links between film violence and crime. As a result, for much of the late eighties and early nineties the genre disappeared from mainstream high profile studio production. Where horror did appear it was in films of other genres – Science Fiction (the *Alien* series) and the thriller (*The Silence of the Lambs*, Demme, 1991).



Finally in the mid nineties as many of the existing popular genres which were becoming increasingly expensive, the studios decided it was time to give the cheap genre of horror another push. To do this however, they had to reinvent the genre taking into account the reasons why audiences had not liked it in the first place – lack of originality and too much violence. Their answer was *Scream* (Craven, 1996) which gave horror a new start by toning down the violence and involving the audience's criticisms of the unoriginality in the jokes of the film.

Reading through this highly simplified account, you will have seen the way the studios and the audience work together as being a symbiotic relationship. We respond with pleasure to certain innovations in the genre and indifference to others and the industry adapts itself to our interests. At least, that's one view.

Why do Film-makers like Genre?

If audiences are so sophisticated that they can appreciate more complex narratives and force the studios to work outside the apparent restrictions of genres, why should the film makers bother with it at all? The main reason is because it is easy:

1. **It's easy to market** – When you are actually watching a film you have the time and concentration to see a genre's conventions being destroyed but a film poster or a trailer needs to be clear and so it is easiest for them to work simply around the genre.
2. **It's easier to make** – if you have someone who has done the special effects on *The Terminator* then the easiest thing in the world for him/her is to go on the make lots of other films which use exactly the same kind of special effects. If you are a director who makes action films it is easy to make more action films – trying something new involves risk of failure. For a long time, Stephen Spielberg was best known for action films. With the possible exception of 2004's *The Terminal*, he has only made one comedy (*1941*) which flopped. He has also only made one romance (*Always*) which also flopped!
3. **It's easier to get a guaranteed audience.** Audiences tend to stick by their favoured genres: if you have seen a film and enjoyed it, you are likely to want to see other films that are similar. There are plenty of very violent gangster films that have only succeeded to any extent because people going to see them thought they would be a bit like *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992). The success of *Scream* spawned a string of sequels and other "teen horror" films: *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Gillespie, 1997), *Final Destina-*

tion (Wong, 2000), *Jeepers Creepers* (Salva, 2001): Hollywood had discovered a new way of making horror make money.

4. **It's easier to choose and market your star.** As much as films are sold through their genre, they also are sold by their stars – but this works with the genre because stars often have generic associations which help us to enjoy the film. In other words when we see a star in a film we are constantly reminded of all the similar films we have seen that star in. Arnold Schwarzenegger is a good example of this. The relationship between the stars and the genre is something that will be dealt with in more detail later.

How film-makers use Genre to target an audience

Look at the advert for the film *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996). At first sight it is clear that the film is going to be a science fiction film. Various ingredients of the genre are present in the advert: the distant earth and the giant spaceship are obvious ones. These work in a very simple genre way. We see the ingredients, we recognise the genre and if we like science fiction we may decide to see the film.

However, the advertising campaign is obviously more complex than that. Part of its success lies in its use of echoes from previous examples of the genre.

For example, the shots of distant earth are a familiar feature of science fact as well as science fiction. Ever since the Apollo missions they have been a familiar signifier of space travel – an image that we know from real life shots as well as from *Apollo 13* (Howard, 1995). The picture is therefore plugging into the associations that we may have from this film of realism and drama.

Similarly, the poster is reminiscent of the marketing for the film *Alien* (Scott, 1979). This also involved a black space background, a mysterious looking alien object and an enigmatic threatening caption. It doesn't actually matter if you don't remember *Alien* or its marketing, since the poster works perfectly well on its own, but if you do, it brings another level of associations to mind.

Track forward in time to 2005, and the poster for Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* bears a strikingly obvious resemblance to *Independence Day*. The theme – of alien invasion – is the same, of course, as is the reason for the aliens' ultimate downfall: a kind of virus.)

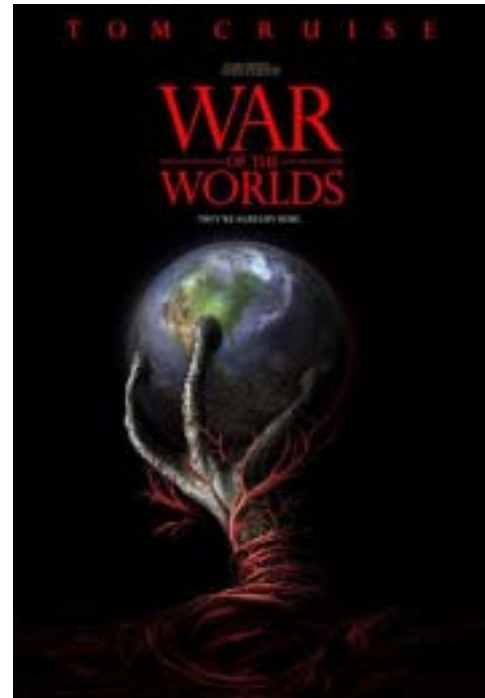
Science Fiction as a genre became massively popular again in the 1990s mainly as a result of one ground-breaking television series – *The X-Files* (Carter, 1993). In fact the producers of *Independence Day* were only able to get the enormous financial backing needed to make their film because of the popularity of the series. *The X-Files* successfully tapped into two apparently contradictory parts of



human nature: our fascination with – and fear of – the unknown. One of the straplines for *Independence Day* read: “The question of whether or not we are alone in the universe has been answered,” which very obviously goes for those same feelings and attempts to bring to our minds the associations from the programme.

However, at the same time as there are plenty of ingredients typical of the science fiction genre, there are also many elements from another type of film which had been out of fashion for a long time. The masses of people killed and the idea of a few people ganging together to survive against incredible odds are key ingredients of the *disaster film* genre which was massively popular in the 1970’s including examples such as *The Towering Inferno* and the *Airport* movies.

Taken all together, *Independence Day* comes out as a **hybrid** movie where genres are mixed in an original way. This once again is part of the enjoyment of the film: we may not spot where exactly the different genre elements are coming from but we are aware that what we are seeing is different from a traditional science fiction film. We are able to enjoy the moments when our expectations are fulfilled (e.g. the massive echo of the Death Star run from *Star Wars*), but at the same time we find it very enjoyable when the genre traditions are broken (e.g. when one of the leading characters deals with an alien by simply kicking it). Our knowledge of the genre allows us to predict a happy ending, but not the journey that will take us there.



Genres change over time

Independence Day was particularly successful in part because it was novel: audiences had never seen a science fiction/disaster movie hybrid before. Its success, however, made it likely that many more would follow, and they did: *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004) and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005) all owe their existence to the success of *Independence Day*, which has become a sort of genre-defining moment in cinema. The Science Fiction genre will become more associated with action – Alex Proyas’s *I Robot* (2004) is a good example of how this is being manifested. This is an action thriller dressed up in Science Fiction clothing: audience expectations of Sci-Fi have shifted.

“Genre defining moments” are fairly rare in the media and they only normally become apparent a long time after the text is created when we can properly see its influence. They don’t always have to be the most popular media products either. It could easily be argued, for example, that the film *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) with its dark settings in hostile but recognisable cities in Earth’s future has had much more effect on the science fiction genre than its contemporary *E.T.* (Spielberg, 1982) despite the fact that *Blade Runner* was virtually ignored on release and *E.T.* is one of the biggest films ever.

While genre-defining moments do not happen that often, it is certain that genres do change over time. You can see this if you consider the gangster genre. In a gangster film of the 1930’s you would see features typical of the genre then: men in hats wearing spats carrying machine guns in violin cases. In a modern gangster film such as *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990) most of these have disappeared – repetition had turned them into cliché and made them comic instead of dramatic. Looking at how genres change over time can tell us a lot, not just

about changing fashions in Hollywood but also about how dominant ideology has shifted over the years. In Science Fiction, for example:

- The 1950s is dominated by fear of invasion – eg *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956): The Cold War between communism and the West.
- The 1960s is dominated by excitement about the future – eg *2001 A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), *Star Trek the TV series* (Roddenberry, 1966): fuelled by the space race and competition to reach the moon.
- The 1970s and 80s addresses worries over the power of technology through films like *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) and *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1987).
- In the 1990s this in turn leads to fear over the power of technology in the wrong hands in *The X-Files*.
- And in the new millennium, a growing realisation about the likelihood of true artificial intelligence made the time right for *I, Robot* and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg, 2001).

How does studying genre help us make sense of the media?

Themes and Ideology

If you were to try to make a list of the *mise-en-scène* ingredients for the two different genres of *contemporary comedy* and *modern thriller* you would find that they are very similar. They take place in the same kind of environments with people in similar family roles and even with similar personalities. Yet clearly these are very different kinds of film. The differences may lie in the *narratives* and *themes* of the films.

A narrative is simply a story and in the same way as you can recognise visual ingredients (iconography) typical of a Western say, you will also be able to recognise typical storylines and themes – the heroes and villains building up to a gun-fight at the end of the film, for example or the theme of what it means to be honourable in an unjust world. Of course if you tried you would find that these storylines and themes apply just as much to a fantasy/science fiction film like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) and then the whole issue of genre becomes confusing.

Beyond traditional Genre.

What genre is *Star Wars*? Does the fact that it is set in space make it science fiction? Is it a western in space age clothes? A fairy tale? Media Studies theorists get into big rows about all of this and from your point of view studying the subject it can all be rather confusing, if you can't say that any genre has predictable props, narrative or themes is there any meaning to the term at all? Science fiction is a very strange genre containing texts with totally different themes and ingredients. What is the point of bundling together films as completely different in every way as *E.T.* and *Alien* and calling them both science fiction.

Some theorists have suggested that what is wrong is not the idea of genre itself but the particular types of categories we have created. The next two sections deal briefly with a couple of these ideas.

Just five genres – McConnell

The way that we normally recognise a genre is to spot the most obvious elements from the generic repertoire – science fiction is science fiction because it is set in space or the future, westerns are set in the west on horseback etc. This is easy, but not always helpful. It's very easy, for example, to argue that *Star Wars* is *not* a Science Fiction film.

Frank McConnell's theory is based around the idea that instead of basing genres around the obvious visual clues, it is more meaningful to split texts according to their *themes* and *plots* and in particular their leading *characters*. He came up with five genres which specifically refer to typical events in the history of any society and the characters who play a part in them. He believes that since films reflect society, they will always involve these kinds of typical events

- The king – establishing the state – the epic.
- The knight – consolidating the state – the adventurous romance.
- The pawn – trapped in the institutionalised state – the melodrama.
- The fool – responding to the madness of the state – the satire.
- Apocalypse – the collapse of the state which leads to a new beginning – no single hero.

Although his use of terms seem to come from fairy stories or history, these genres can be applied to any situation in a film where the lead character will fit one of these roles and the state will be their family, their business or their empire.

Some of these are quite easy to spot. It's quite simple to spot the fool for example in the films of Robin Williams or Eddie Murphy or to see how neatly *Independence Day* fits into the last category.

However, even with such a small number of genres, there is still room for hybridity.

The Godfather part 2. In this film we are shown the life of a young Italian immigrant in New York who over the years sets up a powerful Mafia Clan. This seems to be the epic: he is the king and his Mafia empire is a state. As the film continues and it switches to the life of his son we see the process continue and turn more and more sour as the son begins to leave behind his youthful ideals of turning away from crime and starts killing more and more people. In some ways this could still fit in with McConnell's five genres, but it also has many features of the pawn genre – the son feels himself to be trapped in the situation he is in and believes he doesn't have the freedom to leave his life of crime behind.

On one level you could say that because the film could fit into two genres it means that the theory doesn't work but in fact this confusion can be helpful. If you know the film, applying McConnell's categories actually highlights what make the character of the son (as played by Al Pacino) so interesting – these two different sides to his personality. It also reveals some quite interesting things about the film itself – that it is a kind of an anti – epic which shows that maybe any leader is not as heroic as he might like to appear. Using the genre theory to understand the film has actually helped me to think ideologically about it – often one of the most difficult things to do when analysing a text.

TASK

Try it yourself – fit five films you are familiar with into McConnell's system of categorisation: one for each genre.

The king

The knight

The pawn

The fool

Apocalypse

Hollywood destroys Genre

Part of the reason why genre can be so difficult to define is that more and more often Hollywood film producers are playing games with genre. Today's film-makers have the same broad knowledge of genre as you have and they are less likely than the film-makers of the past to be tied down by genre conventions. This doesn't mean that these films are not using genre, however: in fact it is probably even more important for us to have an understanding of genre if we want to enjoy these genre-busting films. Another example would help to explain this.



A film which on first sight might seem to fit in perfectly with a genre is *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1982). In many ways it is a recreation of the old adventure epics of the 1930's, but Steven Spielberg still plays with the genre conventions. There is a scene where, at the end of a long escape from the villains, Indy finds himself at the end of a street with his exit blocked off by a swordsman. The swordsman elaborately flourishes his sword and begins to move in for the kill. Indy takes out his gun and shoots him. If the audience didn't know the genre and had no expectations of what was meant to happen, this would just be disappointing – we want to see a fight and instead it is all solved too quickly. However, because we know the genre and what is meant to happen, we enjoy the fact that he *doesn't* do what is predictable – the scene becomes funny rather than annoying.

This kind of messing around with genre in the media has been called “post-modernism” and you can talk about texts that do this as being “post-modern”

Post modern texts often mix different genres together: hybridisation. Some people would see this as a cynical attempt by filmmakers to maximise their potential earnings by getting audiences who are interested in different genres in to see films. On the other hand it could be argued that the post-modern audience has grown to expect this hybridisation. Another criticism of hybridisation has been that rather than producing new and radical re-inventions of genre, it can quickly lead to stagnation, as every media producer gets on the same bandwagon.

Post-modern media texts do not just show awareness of the genres of the past, they also knowingly adopt (pastiche) or make fun of (parody) their conventions. A large part of modern media output could be seen as being post-modern, from the knowing *Shrek 2* (Adamson, Asbury, 2004), which is funny because of our familiarity with the texts it references, to *Independence Day*. When a media text makes references to other texts which the audience are expected to recognise it is called *intertextuality*.

TASK

Give three examples of media texts which you think could be described as post-modern, and explain why.

1

2

3

Post-modernism and ideology

Some people have said that this wish of modern media to constantly make fun of previous genres makes modern media texts often meaningless – while ideology is very easy to spot in a film like *Fatal Attraction*, a more post-modern film such as *Pulp Fiction* doesn't really seem to mean anything. A film like *Team America: World Police* (Parker, 2005) makes fun of everything and everyone indiscriminately – it does not appear to have an actual message. At the same time, because of this apparent lack of meaning in recent Hollywood product, some filmmakers who feel they have something to say (such as Kevin Costner, in *Dancing with Wolves*) will do the opposite and stick to their genre rigidly to make this ideology all the clearer.

Who actually makes a film – the Auteur

It is easy to talk about directors and producers as if they are the same thing but in fact the production of a Hollywood film is very complicated and involves a lot of people. It's a good idea to think a bit about these different roles if we are to consider the ideology of the film and its treatment of genre:

The producer is the person who gets together the financial backing for the film, they are often businessmen who stand to make a lot of money out of the film and think of it as a product to be sold. They are after a film therefore, that is going to be successful and fit in often with what they consider to be a successful formula from the past (genre.) They can often be frightened of new ideas because they are risky.

The screenwriter is the person who writes the script. This will often go through many versions and often screenwriters feel that they have little control over what the actual film will end up as. This makes them very different to someone who writes a play for the theatre, for example.

The cast can have a big effect on the meaning of the film – particularly if they are big stars, with big pulling power, they can ask for script changes. Also, their charisma can make a difference to the meaning of the film. If you think of the first *Terminator* film, it would be very different if Arnie was not playing the villain. Someone else in the role would not be able to make the violence and the evil of the *Terminator* seem so attractive and the meaning of the film would be quite different. His emerging status as a 'giant softie' meant that Schwarzenegger would only return for a sequel if his part could be rewritten as a hero – hence *Terminator 2*.

The director is the person who often seems most obviously to be the maker of the film – he gives the orders on the film set which control the behaviour of the actors and actresses, the camera crew, lighting and sound technicians etc.



French director Francois Truffaut: the first auteur?

Because this seems to be the central role in the making of the film, one type of media criticism has come up with the idea that many films are very much the creation of the director in the same way as a book is made by one author. This is called *auteur* theory (after the French word for author) and if it were true it would make Media Studies much easier. If one person was responsible for the ideas behind a film, then it would be much easier for us to talk about the intentions of the filmmaker, to look for ideology and for the mix of genre influences.

In fact, there are many different ways of making a film, depending on the power the director has – Quentin Tarantino, the maker of *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, was director, screenwriter, producer and even actor in those films. He was able to do that because the films were quite low budget and also because after the first film he had an amazing reputation – people were willing to give him money

to make a film and then let him get on with it. He therefore could be seen as an auteur. If you think about *The Dukes of Hazzard* (Chandrasekhar, 2005), on the other hand, the screenwriter, producers, director, stars and director all had an effect on the meaning of the film. This may explain why some films turn out such a mess!

If films are made by committees, the original ideas of the film-makers can get diluted and confused in the final film. Francis Ford Coppola who made such films as *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* has described this as follows:

“The problem is I have a double life and I work for the commercial film industry, which basically wants to make old formulas and make them with new actors. It's like Boeing – they have to make planes that will fly. They can't make one that flies on its side, even though that might be a good idea....People are particular about films, they don't want to be put into an incredibly unusual situation. It's like the little kid who says ‘Tell me the story of the three bears again.’”

At the same time, paradoxically, the idea of an auteur can be useful for selling a film. In the same way as the presence of a certain star or certain genre is good for marketing, you will often see on film posters or trailers the phrase “a film by...” as a guarantee of quality. This can be the case even if the director of the film has had very little auteur power over the film at all. In some cases the only influence a director may have had over the film is in terms of the look of the film – the *mise en scene*.

Stars

Stars have been mentioned throughout this booklet. They are obviously just as important to ways that films are made and sold as genre is. In fact the two things often go hand in hand and often work in the same way. It is just as likely that you will decide to go and see a film because of who is in it as because of the genre it belongs to. Also our reactions to the film are very often affected by the presence of a star and our knowledge of them.

How stars are used

Because stars have such strong selling power, the producers of Hollywood films are very keen to have them in their films. Stars, particularly male stars, are offered enormous amounts of money to appear in films and when they do so, the films are often re-written around their persona.

Sometimes films are described as being a vehicle for their stars. By this we mean that the film is entirely based around making chances for the star to do what they are good at. This can include

- Playing a typical kind of character role.
- Getting into a typical kind of situation.
- Finding a context for doing their “thing” – fighting, singing, joking etc.
- The stars can have an effect on the whole feel of the film and on the various elements in it such as:
 - Iconography
 - Visual style
 - The kind of narrative.



*The Governor of California could always be sure that film-makers would let him be Arnie. Don't worry – **he'll be back...***

So, for example, the presence of Robin Williams in a film will tend to be accompanied by cute kids, comfortable middle class homes and soppy endings, while the typical Arnie film is set in the future, includes big guns, motorbikes and sunglasses and ends with a final shoot out.

Stars also work within the genre and can work to change it – a star such as Clint Eastwood has changed the characteristics of both the western and the action genres by the force of his persona over the years. Similarly Jim Carrey has recently changed the look and feel of the comedy genre.

Why genres change over time

We have referred throughout this section to three key texts of the horror genre, but obviously everything you study can be analysed in these ways.

Changes in the target audience

The target audience of horror has not stayed static over the years – *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) was aimed at an adult audience; you might try to explain in an essay the effect of that on the text. By the time of *Halloween*, on the other hand, the primary audience was teenagers – again you should be able to see the differences. *Scream*, however, is a more confusing case. In many ways it is still primarily a teenage film, but there are features that you might find which are clearly aimed at older adults who have experience of the genre in the past.

In an essay about this, you need to do more than just mentioning these factors. Ideally you should be able to find examples of key moments in the text, which you can analyse in detail and relate to the different audiences.

Changes in the audience's knowledge of the genre from its immediate history

When you go to see a horror film, your expectations and enjoyment are affected by what you know of the genre. In practice this means that when you are writing about a film from the past, you should take into account what audiences then would have been expecting of the genre. At the time that *Psycho* came out it must have seemed a completely original film – audiences were only used to Gothic horror, fantastical stories set in the past and normally abroad. The realism of the film was therefore much more surprising than it is now. *Halloween* came at a time when horror was quite a popular genre and the audience probably had quite a few expectations – not least based on *Psycho* itself. However, John Carpenter would probably argue that there are new features in the film – can you find them? When *Scream* came out, the horror genre was at its lowest ebb. Audiences had grown tired of the lack of plot and what was seen as excessive violence and most horror films went straight to video. *Scream* is a deliberate attempt to refine the genre, taking into account these criticisms.

Again, a good essay about this would not just point out the recent history of the genre, but also examine key scenes and show how they are reinventions of the genre.

The film industry and its effect on the texts

The films we see do not come out of nowhere – they are the results of business decisions by industry figures who care mainly about profit. The horror genre has always been seen as a cheap one – horror films are not expected to make much money, but nor do they require much investment. Alfred Hitchcock was the Stephen Spielberg of his day, but even he could not persuade his film company to pay for *Psycho* to be filmed in colour. *Halloween* came at a time when the film industry was relatively keen to experiment with new directors, but nevertheless it was a low-budget film with little expected of it. In comparison to the other two, *Scream* may seem expensive with costly stars and a reasonable soundtrack. However, it was

made at a time when financially risky blockbuster movies such as *Independence Day* and *Jurassic Park* were becoming more and more common – it is easy to see why the film companies were keen to revive the cheapest genre they knew.

Writing about media industries is notoriously difficult. You are not on a business studies course and the examiners do not expect you to have facts and figures to hand. However, you should think about issues such as those above.

Changes in what society will accept in a film

It should be impossible to talk about the horror genre without mentioning sex, violence and censorship. At the time that Hitchcock made *Psycho*, censorship rules were beginning to liberalise for the first time since the 1930s, but there was still not much that he could get away with. The opening scene of the film showing the heroine in just her underwear would have been hugely shocking and exciting to an audience of 1960. The same could be said of the shower scene, despite the fact that virtually everything is left to the imagination. By the time of *Halloween*, in 1978, the boundaries had shifted to admit quite explicit violence and sex in some films. However, aware of his audience, Carpenter tones things down again leaving much to the imagination.

Changes in technology

Filmmakers, whatever their budget, will attempt to make their film look as modern as possible. To do this they will rely on the latest technology. Your examiner will not expect you to know an enormous amount of detail about this, but to understand genre properly, you should have some appreciation of the importance of technological change.

There is probably fairly little that you can say about *Psycho* and technology; it is probably easier for you to compare the other films you have studied with the standard technology of Hitchcock's time. *Halloween* was greatly influenced by the invention of the steadicam. The visual style of the film, which was so influential in the following years, was actually the result of this new type of camera, which produced the famous stalking shot through the eye of the killer. The more recent *Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sanchez, 1999) relied for its look on cheap digital cameras which did not exist a couple of years ago. Meanwhile digital animation has made it possible for entire worlds to be created inside a computer. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the more recent *Star Wars* films would have been impossible without this innovation – and it has changed genre.

Changes in the dominant ideology and representations

This can be the most difficult area to deal with and as a result many students shy away from it, but if you really want to explore how a genre changes over time, you should be able to show how different texts reflect the values of the society around them. This is very much an A2 concept, so you can park it for now.

Unless you really want to impress your teachers by sharing an example in class...

By Steve Baker

Revised and edited by David Allison

TASK	
<p><i>Genre isn't just about film. Choose one of the following television genres and try to complete a repertoire of elements chart for it.</i></p> <p><i>Cookery programmes / Quiz shows / Home/garden makeover shows</i></p>	
<i>Narratives</i>	<i>Characters</i>
<i>Settings</i>	<i>Iconography</i>